



GANDHI AND NEHRU: A STUDY IN THEIR ECONOMIC IDEAS

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INTRODUCTION

Indian history during the first half of the 20th century is inconceivable without acknowledging the dynamic role of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. They stood apart from the rest of their contemporaries as the two leading figures of Indian Nationalism. They wanted to see India free from the foreign rule. They were complementary and supplementary to each other in many respects. Gandhi could not do without the support of the young, dynamic, highly educated new leader, while Nehru was in need of a wise teacher who thought in the traditional Indian way, having unique ability to organise the masses. They contributed immensely not only for the promotion of the cause of Indian Nationalism but were also deeply involved in evolving comprehensive models of social reconstruction and economic development to be taken up in the country, immediately after the attainment of Independence. On the economic front, both Gandhi and Nehru stood for the establishment of a system which would free society from the curse of poverty and exploitation and provide equal opportunities to all its members. Both shared dream of classless and casteless society. However, the two thinkers also had differences on a number of issues. The present paper seeks to explore the convergencies and divergencies between the economic philosophy of these two personalities.

The basic ideas of Gandhi in economics as well as politics were drawn from ancient Indian philosophy of life. Indian philosophy has always preached that man's life is for spiritual evolution and not only for physical satisfaction. Born and brought up in the tradition of Indian philosophy and spiritualism, Gandhi, an ardent follower of Gita, developed an economic theory, which was in the line with Indian spiritualism.

He insisted that the objective of human conduct should be moral and spiritual development. He had no faith in an economics which is devoid of morality and which disregards moral values. To quote him, "True economics never militates against the highest ethical standard and an economics that inculcates mammon worship and enables the strong to amass wealth at the expense of the weak is a false and dismal science."¹

Gandhi did not receive any formal training in economics nor did he study much economics on his own. His economic ideas were shaped by his own practical experiences and intensive readings of John Ruskin, Leo Tolstoy, Gita and his political and moral principles such as *Swaraj*, *Sarvodaya*, truth, non-violence and the like. Based on these wider social principles and teachings of different personalities, Gandhi developed his

economic ideas, which if brought together would give a picture of economic system that he visualized.

The most important principle which influenced Gandhi, and which later became the guiding spirit of all his ideas, was the principle of *Sarvodaya*-the good of all. The principle originated out of his reading of Ruskin's *Unto This Last* which held that the good of individual is contained in the good of all.

His economic ideas were also derived from his experiences of Indian social life of his time. He was very much perturbed by the abject poverty of his countrymen. He said, "According to me the economic constitution of India, and for that matter of the world, should be such that no one under it should suffer from want of food and clothing. In other words, everyone should be able to get sufficient work to enable him to make the two ends meet."² He scratched his brain to the maximum to find out the solution. But he wanted a solution which may lead to spiritual progress and not an opposite retrogression. Thus, he wanted economic progress but not at the cost of spiritual values.

Central to the Gandhi model of development was the rejection of classical capitalism and western obsession with material progress which he felt had accentuated the gulf between the elite and the masses and led to the spiritual impoverishment of mankind.

Nehru born of a rich and aristocratic family and educated in a western country had a scientific approach to India's political, social and economic problems which differs from Gandhi in many respects. In a letter to Gandhi on January 11, 1928 Nehru wrote: "Reading many of your articles in *Young India*- Your Autobiography etc., - I have often felt how very different my ideas were from yours. And I have felt that you were hasty in your judgements, or rather having arrived at certain conclusions you were over-eager to justify them by any scrap of evidence you might get.... You misjudge greatly, I think, the civilization of the West and attach too great importance to its failing... I certainly disagree with this viewpoint."³

Nehru was a realist, while Gandhi was an idealist. Nehru represented the modern scientific outlook and had the vision of building India through the application of science and technology. Gandhi was opposed to the ideal of multiplication of wants and animal appetites. He advocated the ideal of plain living and high thinking. According to him, "independent India can only discharge her duty towards groaning world by adopting a simple but ennobled life... high thinking is inconsistent with

complicated material life based on high speed imposed on us by Mammon Worship. ^{“4}

Nehru regarded poverty as the worst enemy of mankind. In his attitude towards poverty, he was not ready to make any compromise. Gandhi while thinking about the poor used the term *Daridranarayan*, the ‘Lord of the poor’ or ‘God that resides in the poor’. Nehru could not appreciate such Gandhian terminology which appeared to him as the ‘glorification of poverty’. Expressing his view on this particular aspect Nehru said, “God was especially the Lord of the poor: they were His chosen people. That, I suppose, is the usual religious attitude everywhere. I could not appreciate it, for poverty seemed to me a hateful thing, to be fought and rooted out and not to be encouraged in any way.”⁵ Talking about Gandhi, Nehru said, “He is not enamoured of ever-increasing standards of living, and the growth of luxury at the cost of spiritual and moral values. He does not favour the life; for him the straightway is the hard way, and the love of luxury leads to crookedness and loss of virtue.”⁶

Gandhi was not blind to the problem of poverty in India. He was, on the other hand very much alive to it. The difference between Nehru and Gandhi was that while Nehru’s outlook on life and society was very modern, Gandhi’s was deeply religious. Gandhi hated poverty as much as hated the excess of wealth.

However, Gandhi disliked the Socialism and Communism of the western type because, according to him, they believed in the essential selfishness of human nature. He, on the other hand, wanted to base his concept of socialism and communism on non-violence and on the harmonious co-operation of labour and capital, landlord and tenants.

The most important and yet the most controversial point as regards the economic ideas of Gandhi is the theory of trusteeship. This theory has created an ideological difference between Gandhi and Nehru. Gandhi was against capitalism and yet he was not against capitalists. He wanted to create an economic system in which one will have enough for himself and nothing more than that. Surplus amount should be given to the community and that is called trusteeship. Gandhi wanted the handful of rich to be the trustees of the poor and to be charitable. Once Gandhi addressing a deputation by big zamindars said, “I shall be no party to dispossessing propertied classes of their private property without just cause. My objective is to reach your hearts and convert you so that you may hold all your private property in trust for your tenants and use it primarily for their welfare... But supporting that there is an attempt unjustly to deprive you of your property you will find me fighting on your side.”⁷

To Nehru, Gandhi’s theory of trusteeship appeared unreasonable as an individual given unchecked power and wealth could not be expected to use it entirely for the public good. Differing with Gandhi, Nehru said, “I confess that I have always been wholly unable to understand how any person can reasonably expect this to happen, or imagine that therein lies the solution of the

social problems”⁸. According to him ‘Even Plato’s philosopher-Kings could hardly have borne this burden worthily.’⁹ The theory would only perpetuate the snobbery of birth, position and economic power and consequences would be disastrous. Gandhi suggested to the princes to grant autonomy to their subjects and regard themselves as the trustees for the people over whom they ruled. Reacting to this suggestion, Nehru wrote, “If there is anything in this idea of trusteeship, why should we object to the claim of the British government that they are trustees for the Government of India? Except for the fact that they are foreigners in India, I see no difference. There are almost equally marked differences as regards the colour of the skin, racial origin and culture between various people in India.”¹⁰

Nehru had always been thinking of ‘the economic framework of society’ under Socialism. In 1936, he said, “The Congress today stands for full democracy in India and fights for a democratic state, not for socialism. It is anti-imperialist and strives for great changes in our political and economic structure. I hope the logic of events will lead to socialism, for that seems to me the only remedy for economic ills.”¹¹

Nehru favoured the development of “a socialist order... with a controlled production and distribution of wealth for the public good.”¹² He aimed at some practical ways to deal with class interests. At an intellectual level, both Marx and Russian experiments impressed Nehru. He confessed that “the theory and philosophy of Marxism lightened up many a dark corner of my mind. History came to have a new meaning for me.”¹³ But at the same time he found that there was plenty of dogma in official communism in Russia and he disapproved of this. Nehru analysed communism in the intellectual and pragmatic way. Though the practical side of communism as he saw in Russia, attracted him greatly, yet he was able to see unsavoury features of the system. The reasons were his background, personality makeup, impact of Gandhian philosophy of purity of means and his abhorrence of violence. He was dissatisfied with the violent methods advocated by the Communists. He found the answer to the question of methods for social revolution in Gandhian philosophy pf “Ends and Means”.

The result of the peculiar situation, in which Nehru was placed was that his socialism got diluted. He asserted that democratic method was only method of the attainment of a socialistic state as also of building it up on a firm foundation.

Nehru introduced socialism as model of development which is based on mixed ideology. Nehru’s democratic socialism emphasises ‘mixed economy’, because he allowed both public and private sector to co-exist. He preferred selective nationalisation of key industries and left the rest for private enterprise.

Nehru visualised rapid economic growth through the instrument of economic planning. Even before independence Nehru advocated planned economic development of India. His faith in planning was mainly due to the success of economic planning in Russia. In a letter to his daughter Nehru wrote, “The second

wonder that the Soviets performed was to transform great parts of this area out of all recognition by prodigious schemes of planning. There is no instance in recorded history of such rapid advance of a people... The most notable advances have been in education and in industry. By vast Five-Year Plans the industrialization of Russia has been pushed on at a feverish pace and enormous factories have been put up.”¹⁴

Gandhi was shocked at the vast gulf that stretched between the rich and the poor, in their ways of living and their opportunities of growth and one of the principle causes for the vast difference between the rich and the poor seemed to him the capitalist individualist civilization of the west as embodied in the big machine. From this standpoint Gandhi tended to reject the idea of large-scale industrialization based on modern machinery.

Gandhi condemned industrialization because it accentuates materialism and spread moral corruption. He said, “Indeed the west has had a surfeit of industrialization and exploitation. The fact is that this civilization is all evil...I have no quarrel with steamship and telegraphs. They may stay, if they can without the support of materialism and all it connotes.”¹⁵

He remarked, “I would prize every invention of science made for the benefit of all.”¹⁶ Every machine that helps every individual has a definite place in society. However, he made it clear that he would not tolerate such machines which might result in the displacement of labour and the centralization of wealth. Thus, he said, “I would welcome every improvement in the cottage machine, but I know that it is criminal to displace hand labour by the introduction of power-driven spindles unless one is at the same time ready to give millions of farmers some other occupation in their homes.”¹⁷ He observed, “Today machinery helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this construction of thing that I am fighting with all my might.”¹⁸

He looked with yearning to the days of the old autonomous and more-or-less self-contained village community where there had been an automatic balance between production, distribution, and consumption; where political or economic power was spread out and not concentrated as it is today; where a kind of simple democracy prevailed; where the gulf between the rich and the poor was not so marked; where the evil of great cities were absent and people lived in contact with the life-giving soil and breathed the pure air of the open spaces.¹⁹

Gandhi emphasised the values of simple village life in order to create a new social order based on truth and non-violence. His belief that India lived in villages led him to propound the concept of village *Swaraj* which among other things, envisaged village self-sufficiency. To quote him, “My idea of self-sufficiency is that villages must be self-sufficient in regard to food, cloth and other basic necessities... though our aim is complete self-sufficiency, we shall have to get from outside the village what we cannot produce in the village; we shall have to produce more of what we can in order thereby to obtain in exchange

what we are unable to produce.”²⁰

Gandhi wanted to make every village self-supporting for its food and clothing through *Khadi*. He conceived *Khadi* as a universal industry. *Khadi ensures the proper utilisation of human labour. Khadi would supply work to millions of villages. According to Gandhi, spinning must be a compulsory objective of every able-bodied man.* He conceived spinning as an emblem of non-violence or a doctrine that had its roots in the purest ahimsa. In addition to *Khadi* he mentioned some village- industries like hand-grinding, tanning, hand-pounding, soap-making, oil-pressing etc. To quote him, “It is my claim that (by reviving *Khadi* and other village industries) we shall have evolved so far that we shall remodel national life in keeping with the ideal of simplicity and domesticity implanted in the bosom of the masses. We will not then be dragged into an imperialism which is built upon exploitation of the weaker races of the earth, and the acceptance of a giddy materialistic civilization protected by naval and air forces that have made peaceful living almost impossible.”²¹

Gandhi opted for decentralization of economic power. In line with this reasoning for Gandhi the advocacy of cottage and small-scale industries for all round development of rural areas assumes great significance. Gandhi believed that decentralization of economic power could fruitfully serve the interest of community by bringing about rapid development of industries.

Gandhi's two years stay at the Inner Temple in London merely provided him with legal training and he returned to India in 1891 with his Indian outlook unaffected by the British culture. He represented the true spirit of India unaffected by the western influences and he was able to identify himself with the poor masses of the country.²²

On the other hand, Nehru was not a blind follower of Gandhi. His passion for clarity and logic often clashed with the Mahatma's intuitive and pragmatic approach, British culture had profound effect on Nehru whereas Gandhi remained unaffected by it. Nehru's seven years stay at Harrow, Cambridge and London made him 'a queer mixture of East and West' and even in his own country, sometimes, he had an exile feeling.²³

Nehru realised the inevitability of the impact of modern civilisation and advancement of science and technology in building a modern India with an element of compromise with India's cultural heritage. He was a link between the minority of westernized Indians at the top and the vast masses below.²⁴ In the field of economic policy, Nehru did not believe in a dogmatic approach. He believed that India will have to evolve its own economic policy to solve its problems.

Coming to economics he said: “All books on economics written in America, England, Russia or China may help us, but will not suit us in the final analysis because we have got to take into consideration of the conditions of our country. And with the help of others, no doubt, find out, first of all, what our problems are and then seek their solution. Of course, we are doing that.

It will not do if we were to get hold of some problems in some other country and may be, a solution of another country and try to apply it to the problem here, which may be different.”²⁵

Nehru was always greatly concerned over the magnitude of poverty in India and economic and social deprivation and exploitation of the poor and weaker sections of the Indian society. He was very keen that the problems of poverty and inequality should be effectively tackled with speed in order to improve the condition and quality of life of the poor and the weak and to restore their human dignity. He traced India’s economic backwardness and poverty to Britain’s domination over India. During the period when England was going through the period of advancing industrialization, India underwent a process of “passive industrialization” in course of which India became a great producer of raw material to feed the factories of England and a huge market to consume the goods made in these factories.

In consequence, the burden on the land grew and with-it unemployment and poverty, and there was a progressive ruralisation of India. He also did not fail to notice that “the so-called westernization in India has actually, for the time being strengthened feudalism, and instead of solving any of our problems, has simply intensified them.”²⁶ Nehru stressed that the only solution lay in the utilization of modern science and technology for accelerating the pace of industrialization on which depended also the prospects of agricultural development and the dismantling of the colonial economic structure.

In contrast to Gandhi, Nehru was fully conscious that industrialization – setting up of basic industries and big industries in addition to the cottage and small industries was fundamental to the rapid progress of the country.

He said, “I am all for tractors and big machinery, and I am convinced that the rapid industrialization of India is essential to relieve the pressure on land, to combat poverty and raise standards of livings, for defence and a variety of other purpose.”²⁷

Emphasizing the need of industrial development Nehru said, “It can hardly be challenged that, in the context of the modern world, no country can be politically and economically independent... unless it is highly industrialized and has developed its power resources to the utmost. Nor can it achieve or maintain high standards of living and liquidate poverty without the aid of modern technology in almost every sphere of life.”²⁸

According to him the material prosperity brought about by the industrial age made cultural and spiritual progress far easier for large number. Nehru argued that emphasis on *Khadi*, hand-spinning and hand-weaving, which was Gandhiji’s special favourite, was an intensification of individualism in production, and was thus a throw-back to the pre-industrial age. As a solution of any vital present-day problem, it could not be taken seriously, and it produced a mentality which might become an obstacle to growth in the right direction.²⁹ He did recognise that *Khadi* served certain useful purpose in India but only as a

transitional affair and added that, “the main drive in future will have to be a complete overhauling of the agrarian system and the growth of industry.”³⁰

However, it is observed that while there were differences of emphasis among the two leaders, but it would not be proper to overemphasize the divergencies between the economic ideas of Gandhi and Nehru.

While Gandhi emphasised the value of developing agriculture and small industries, he also recognised the need to develop heavy industries as and when required. He even came to accept the necessity of many kinds of heavy industries and large-scale key industries and public utilities, provided they were state-owned and did not interfere with some kinds of cottage industries which he considered as essential.³¹ Similarly, while Nehru emphasized the value of developing heavy industries, he also recognised the need to develop agriculture and small industries.

On September 29, 1939 in a letter to Krishna Kriplani, Nehru said:

I am personally a believer in the development of large-scale industries. Nevertheless, I have wholeheartedly supported the *Khadi* movement as well as the wider village industries movement for political, social and economic reasons. In my mind there was no essential conflict between the two, although there might occasionally be conflict in regard to certain aspects or developments of both. In this matter I do not represent Gandhiji’s viewpoint to any large extent, but in practice so far, there has not been any marked conflict between the two viewpoints. Therefore, I feel, that it is inevitable and desirable to encourage the use and development of big machine and thus to industrialize India. I am convinced at the same time that no amount of industrialization in this way will do away with the necessity of developing cottage industries on a large scale in India, and this not merely as feeders but as independent units. I do not know what science may achieve in the course of the next generation or two but as far as I can see cottage industries will be essential for India in addition to large scale industries, which should be encouraged in every way. The problem, therefore, becomes one of coordination between the two.³²

Thus, it is observed that, despite certain differences, there were basic similarities in the economic goals of Gandhi and Nehru. Both were equally concerned with eradicating poverty, providing employment to more and more people and making the country self-reliant in economic field. Both wanted the means of production, distribution and exchange to be under social control and the profit motive and acquisitive tendency among individuals to be kept under check.

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